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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001036

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: UNEMPLOYMENT DEMONSTRATION TURNS VIOLENT

REF: MANAMA 885

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

1. (C) A July 15 demonstration of the Committee for the Unemployed turned violent, with up to twenty protesters and one police officer sustaining injuries. An RSO witness said protesters started the clash by pushing the police, and the police responded with baton blows. The Committee, which was protesting a lack of unemployment benefits in the recently passed budget, has staged a number of rallies in recent months deemed illegal by the GOB and is clearly interested in picking a fight with the government. Following the demonstration both the Committee and the GOB were widely criticized for their actions, which may contribute to an atmosphere conducive to a mutual reduction in hostility.

Rotten Eggs and Tomatoes

2. (C) Defying repeated government warnings, 100-150 (RSO estimate) protesters from the Committee for the Unemployed gathered at the Al Fateh Grand Mosque July 15. A police representative told the press that the demonstration was not permitted because its timing and location were inappropriate, and because the Committee's petition to demonstrate was not signed by five people from the area, a legal requirement. The Committee's well-publicized plan was to march towards parliament and pelt the building with spoiled eggs and tomatoes to symbolize that parliament is rotten and useless for not including unemployment benefits in the recently passed budget. The protesters soon found their path blocked by riot police who had closed the roads around the parliament.

Protesters Beaten

3. (C) According to press reports, the protesters demanded that they be allowed to continue their march, but the police refused. A clash then erupted between the two sides, with each side claiming that the other started the violence. An RSO investigator who was at the scene said Committee members started pushing the police, and the police responded first by pushing back and escalated to baton blows. Ten to twenty protesters and one police officer reportedly suffered injuries. Committee representatives said the injuries sustained by the protesters included broken bones and welts. Two local newspapers published graphic photos of welts caused by baton blows. Abdulhadi Al Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab of the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) were among those beaten. Several newspapers said that a police officer confiscated a photojournalist's camera at the demonstration, but the camera was later returned.

4. (SBU) The press reported that two related demonstrations occurred later in the day on July 15. A number of people gathered at the hospital where the injured were being treated to protest the police actions, and the police allege that one of their patrol cars was attacked. In the evening, several hundred people associated with the Committee reportedly tried to march from a mosque to a police station, but they were disbanded peacefully.

Council of Representatives Condemns Demonstration

5. (C) On July 16, the Council of Representatives (COR) passed a statement condemning the demonstration as a "dangerous violation which should be strictly punished." The statement called the protest a threat to democracy and an insult to all Bahrainis. It praised the "civilized manner in which the police deal with illegal demonstrations" and backed "all actions that the Ministry of Interior must take to maintain stability and security." The debate on the statement was heated, and 11 of the 38 MPs present opposed it. MP Abdulnabi Salman told EmbOff that the statement only exacerbated an already tense situation.

GOB and Committee Criticized

16. (C) Both the GOB and the protesters drew harsh criticism following the demonstration. Many observers felt both sides were to blame for the clash. MP Salman said that he did not agree with the protesters' insulting stance against the elected chamber, but that it did not merit police brutality. Salman added that unemployment is a serious issue that the government must address before the situation gets out of control. MP Mohammed Al Abbas told EmbOff that prior to the demonstration, he strongly discouraged Committee members from staging the rally. He warned that it would escalate tension with the GOB and hurt their cause. Al Abbas noted that while some in the Committee agreed with him, others insisted that public pressure is the only political tool that yields results. Al Abbas was equally critical of the GOB for its poor economic policies and for the excessive police force used at the demonstration.

17. (C) Soon after the demonstration, EmbOff spoke with a number of Committee members and other activists who were disappointed with the approach Al Khawaja and others are taking. They said Al Khawaja is so focused on antagonizing the GOB that he is destroying hope for productive engagement between the two sides. Some commented that demonstrations are so frequent these days that they are losing their meaning. At the same time, they say the police could have easily restrained the protesters without violence, and they condemned the beatings as excessive and dangerous.

18. (SBU) A diverse group of sports clubs, political societies, and the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society all issued public statements condemning the Committee. On the other hand, opposition Shi'a political society Al Wifaq publicly condemned the police and said their treatment marked a return to the violent period of the 1990's under the State Security Law. Al Wifaq called for a neutral investigation into the event. The four political societies that boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections, including Al Wifaq, issued a joint statement against police brutality.

19. (C) The Committee held another rally on July 17 without police interference. It had planned to stage a march to an undisclosed location, but canceled the march on the advice of leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Ali Salman. According to the press, Sheikh Ali advised Committee members to file a case against the Ministry of Interior for the July 15 police abuse, but not to organize more protests as the situation needs to cool down. Leading Committee members told EmbOff that they would follow Sheikh Ali's guidance, but they believed Committee's recent demonstrations (reftel) had positively affected their cause. As evidence, the members cited several new GOB initiatives to help the unemployed.

Comment

10. (C) Both the protesters and the government handled the July 15 demonstration poorly. Al Khawaja and other Committee members are clearly seeking to provoke a crisis with the GOB, which they hope will lead to greater political and economic influence for Bahrain's Shi'a majority. As long as unemployment rates run high (currently 15-20% by some estimates) and hit primarily the Shi'a community, lack of jobs will be a potential source of instability. The police, who were apparently acting on orders from the Ministry of Interior, reacted in an excessively violent way, playing into the hands of protest leaders. On a positive note, a growing number of people on both sides, with memories of the turbulent 1990's fresh in their minds, are now interested in cooling down the situation.

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